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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a school district's efforts to work collaboratively with parents, teachers, principals, and community representatives as they confronted concerns about their middle-level program. It recommends strategies for strengthening and refining a program that was undergoing severe strains as the district gathered data about program satisfaction. The groups worked to refine the program, and they tackled the divisive issues at the center of the debate. As part of the solution, the district developed a collaborative relationship with a regional university, and from this partnership several plans emerged for resolving differences among group members. The successful strategies incorporated multiple approaches to address the underlying issues creating the tensions, leading to durable solutions. The depth of the concerns and the many strongly held beliefs surrounding the middle-level program often led to frustration and the lack of quick solutions. While the approaches identified in this study required a high level of commitment from all parties, they resulted in strong and viable relationships, which in turn contributed to long-term success at resolving differences among groups, as well as building shared resolve to strengthen the middle-level program. (Contains 31 references.) (RJM)

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Reshaping Middle School: Engaging Parents and Community in the Work

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At the center of debate about school reform lies the middle school. Described as both "the last best hope of American youth" (Carnegie Council, 1989) and as "education's weak link" (Southern Regional Education Board, 1998) the role and function of the middle school continues to be the center of dispute. Proponents of a strong academic program and advocates of a developmental approach debate the values on which middle level programs are based. Differing perspectives on the middle school often contribute to passionate debate about its role (Beane, 1999; Williamson & Johnston, 1999).

While the debate continues nationally, individual schools and districts are faced with resolving these tensions in a local context (Johnson & Williamson, 1998). Demand for improved student achievement, greater accountability, improved test scores, and greater responsiveness to parents characterize the tensions. In response, many schools launched collaborative efforts to identify local needs and to strengthen their middle school programs in ways that build confidence and support for the school.

This paper reports on the process employed by one northeastern district that made a conscious decision to work collaboratively with parents, teachers, principals and community representatives to confront concerns about its middle level program and to recommend strategies for its strengthening and refinement.

The report describes the strains that emerged as the district gathered data about program satisfaction, worked to refine that program, and confronted the often-divisive issues at the center of the debate.

To assist with the study the district developed a collaborative relationship with a regional university and utilized the resources of one faculty member who is a nationally known middle level expert and also a skilled facilitator. The selection was made to inform both the program development and the process for resolving the issues.

From this work emerged several strategies for resolving differences among group members and developing shared commitment to a reformed educational program. These strategies, or tools, while locally constructed, provide valuable

guidance to school leaders in other settings as they work to address complex and contentious issues.

Successful strategies incorporated multiple approaches to address the underlying issues creating the tensions, leading to durable solutions. The depth of the concerns and the strongly held beliefs that engendered the beliefs often led to frustration and the lack of quick solutions. While the approaches identified in this study took longer to craft, required a greater level of commitment from all parties, and necessitated creative and flexible responses, they resulted in stronger and more viable relationships among participants. These relationships contributed to long-term success at resolving differences among groups and building shared resolve to strengthen the middle level program.

Middle School Reform

Early efforts to reform middle level education were characterized by the adoption of a set of programs, often those espoused by national advocacy groups (Williamson & Johnston, 1999). These initiatives focused on organizational changes and reflected a commitment by middle level educators to make their practice more closely aligned with the needs of students.

Too often such efforts were driven by changes in student population and were adopted without broad participation by teachers, parents and other community members. This lack of involvement frequently led to misunderstanding and mistrust of the motives behind the program changes (Clark & Clark, 1994; Beane, 1999).

Mounting evidence demonstrates that many of the recommendations for reformed middle level schools contribute to improved achievement and a more positive school environment (Felner, et al., 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993; Russell, 1997). Nevertheless, concerns continue to emerge in individual schools and local school districts about their appropriateness and effect.

As these concerns emerge school leaders face demands to engage school constituents in processes to examine their commitment to a middle level program. Paralleling the emergence of the concerns, research demonstrated that the most effective and sustainable changes occurred in schools and districts that worked collaboratively with teachers, parents and other community members to examine their school program and make recommendations for its refinement (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Williamson & Johnston, 1991; 1998; 2000). Starting a dialogue with all of the stakeholders in the community was seen as a very tangible manifestation of a willingness to work collaboratively.

At the center of the debate about the middle level school is disagreement about its function and purpose (Beane, 1999; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). Despite the widespread acceptance of the model, significant questions still emerge about whether the middle school provides a quality, intellectually challenging educational experience for students. Too frequently schools just modified their structure by organizing into teams, altering the schedule and implementing teacher-based guidance activities. For many parents these changes represented an over emphasis on social and emotional issues often resulting in lowered academic standards (Beane, 1999).

Despite the growing adoption of the recommendations for reformed middle level schools (Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; Valentine, Clark, Hackmann & Petzko, 2002), and the evidence that the suggestions positively impact students (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993), parents and others continue to raise concern with the model (Beane, 1999; DeYoung, Howley & Theobald, 1995; Johnston & Williamson, 1998; Saks, 1999).

Cuban (1992) described the community relations need this way.

> As long as schools have all the trademarks of what the public expects in a school, they are 'real schools.' If the public loses confidence in the district's capacity to produce real schools displaying familiar features, rules and classifications, political support and funding shrink swiftly (p. 248).

Proponents of the middle level school are passionate in their advocacy. Those who question the model's effectiveness are equally passionate. Therein lies the dilemma for local schools. How do they work to resolve the tension and restore confidence in the middle level model?

This Study

Local issues and concerns frequently drive middle level reform. Demographic shifts, funding changes and state accountability standards often lead to a review and examination of the program (Clark & Clark, 1994; Williamson & Johnston, 1991).

This paper describes the efforts of one community to look at its middle level program by identifying concerns about the current model and by working with stakeholders to recommend changes. The initiative was based on several central beliefs: the importance of collaboration, the value of using data and information to guide decision-making, and the importance of using best practice to guide thinking.

The Community Context

The district is located in southwestern New York State and is surrounded by a rich agricultural area and abundant outdoor recreational opportunities. The largest city in the district is in a declining industrial setting. Over the last four decades, the city lost nearly half of its population as industries associated with the Rust Belt migrated south or overseas. The resulting deterioration in the tax base caused perennial budget deficits and property tax increases. The city, once characterized by middle income jobs and close knit neighborhoods became burdened with low wage jobs in manufacturing and tourism, and a larger than average proportion of renters rather than homeowners. The current unemployment rate is higher than state or national averages.

In spite of these conditions, city residents remain hopeful that their circumstances will improve. A large number of private foundations and donors continue to support the city and surrounding communities. Tough circumstances have brought community groups together to collaborate on ideas for revitalizing the downtown area, expanding tourism opportunities and bringing families back to the city. This enthusiasm contributed to the willingness of parent and community groups to join the discussion about the district's middle schools.

About 5500 students are enrolled in the district's three middle schools, six elementary schools and one high school. In recent years, the middle schools, comprised of students in grades five through eight, experienced a turnover in leadership. These changes, along with several at the district level, allowed each of the middle school programs to evolve quite differently. During this study, two of the three middle school principals left their position for varying reasons and were replaced by their assistant. All three principals are non-tenured.

The district adopted a middle school model approximately 15 years ago as part of a larger realignment of school boundaries. It was at that point that fifth grade moved to the middle school and ninth grade to the high school. During the initial years of the middle school program, an external consultant worked with the district to educate staff on the underpinnings of middle level education. Since that initial training, opportunities for specific middle school staff development were limited. This lack of professional development, coupled with a 60% turnover in staff during the last five years and a lack of middle level certification in the state, left a void of personnel knowledgeable about the middle level school and the students they served.

Regular changes in leadership at the district and building level also constrained a systematic review of the middle school program. As a result, the schedule adopted 15 years ago remained relatively unchanged with the exception of some minor modifications that arose out of individual building needs. Over this same period of time, the program in the three schools began to drift apart in a balkanized fashion. Varying configurations of teams, inconsistent

servicing of special needs students and unequal lengths for class periods highlighted these differences. This led to an underlying current of perceived inequity among the schools and added additional tension.

Several contextual issues defined the study. Each, in its own way, contributed to the complexity of the work and the need to continually recommit to strategies built on trust, respect for diverse points-of-view, and valuing collaboration. One significant parameter, established by the district, was that the recommendations not require additional staff or financial resources. However, current resources could be reallocated. This parameter forced the committee to examine and re-examine each recommendation and reflected the district's financial reality. The other critical parameter was that teachers and other district employees bargain collectively. In fact, the committee recommendations were made at a time that the district was opening negotiations with teachers on a contract extension. This meant that any process to modify the middle school program had to consciously consider the implications on teacher workload and other contractual requirements.

While the committee worked steadfastly to prepare recommendations for reforming the middle school program it found itself immersed in district budget decisions and contract negotiations. Despite these obstacles, the committee persevered and completed its work.

Methodology and Data Analysis

This investigation utilized a modified case study approach (Stake, 1995). It examined, in some depth, the issues and concerns as well as the approaches to resolving those concerns in one school district.

The data for this investigation were gathered from participants in the review process, in the natural setting of their work. What Lincoln and Guba (1985) call naturalistic inquiry, others call a phenomenological approach. Borg, Gall, and Gall (1993) elaborated on the value of such an approach. It allows the researcher to "develop an understanding of individuals and events in their natural state,

taking into account the relevant context" (p. 194). Such an approach recognizes the uniqueness of each setting and is particularly relevant when the researcher wants to examine and understand a program or event from "the perspective of the participants" (p. 194).

The researchers served as facilitators for the review committee's work. As such, the researchers had first-hand knowledge of the issues and the debate. While helpful to have such ready access to the subjects, such access may lead to subjective bias. To minimize subjectivity the perspectives that emerged from this work were shared with committee members and district staff. Such "member checking" is a useful way to assure validity for qualitative research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). If the researcher's reconstructions are recognizable to the subjects as accurate representations of their realities it lends credibility to the conclusions.

Data were collected in a number of ways. First, the researchers maintained detailed notes throughout the study. These notes were helpful in reconstructing the committee's discussion and debate. Second, the committee maintained detailed records of its work (e.g., agendas, minutes, planning documents). In each case a member of the committee, not the researchers, maintained those records. Each document was reviewed and accepted as accurate by the committee as a whole.

Data were analyzed to identify patterns of responses. This analysis revealed major themes. Documents and records were reviewed, using key word and trend analyses. The themes were confirmed and the field notes provided explicit details and examples to illustrate each of the themes and responses.

What Did We Do?

The district began its middle school review in November 2001. Before the committee began, several months were devoted to framing the task, identifying committee members, and identifying an external consultant to advise the district and the committee on its work.

Selecting members for the committee proved to be one of the more complex tasks. Due to the potential for the recommendations to impact curricular areas nearly all curriculum coordinators wanted to participate in the work. The district curricular office made the final selection from among this group. In addition, the faculty at each school selected representatives, and parents and community groups were invited to participate. This led to a committee of over thirty members consisting of teachers, principals, curriculum specialists, parents and community advocates.

Initially members were unclear about the committee's role. Was it to resolve specific issues or to study the entire middle school program. This lack of clarity surfaced in nearly every discussion and shaped the conversation about committee operations, decision-making, and communication.

A critical initial task for the facilitator was to create a climate among committee members that would support collaboration. Despite some early reluctance, the facilitator remained steadfast in their commitment to collaboration. Ultimately the committee agreed on norms for committee operation and norms of collaboration. Those norms would prove useful much later in the committee's work.

The norms of collaboration (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) were of most importance. They demonstrated in a very explicit way a commitment to shared decision-making, to valuing all voices, to gathering and sharing information with stakeholders, and to working to study the issues and recommend solutions.

Prior to launching the work, the district decided to use an external facilitator to guide the committee's work. This proved to be one of the most important

decisions. Distrust among committee members and of district motives contributed to lengthy and contentious debate at some meetings. Neutral external facilitation, with no vested interest in the outcome, proved critical to accelerating the committee's work.

The role of the external facilitator was key. The facilitator remained resolute in adhering to agreed upon norms of collaboration. The role was one of asking questions, provoking discussion, making observations, assisting in the identification of resources, and suggesting strategies for analyzing and discussing issues and resolving disagreement.

As with most committees, intervention was needed to build capacity among committee members, especially parents, to discuss, critique and debate issues with which they are not familiar. The committee adopted several approaches.

First, the committee agreed to focus on data and rationale rather than individual preferences and intuition. This minimized the impact of one member describing himself or herself as an "expert" in an area. The committee regularly asked for supporting documents (e.g., readings, data, policy and laws) in order to completely understand the issue.

The committee also used local data about the middle schools rather than data from national studies. The data had been gathered during the months prior to the first committee meeting. A series of focus group sessions with teachers, parents, students and administrators were held to learn from stakeholders about the issues with the current middle school program.

Committee members also agreed to build a common information base about middle schools. A common set of readings was provided all members and time was devoted during committee meetings to discuss the readings and the implications for the committee's work. In addition, a local database was created that contained demographic and program data about the three schools. This assured that all committee members, internal and external members alike, would have access to the same information.

Following the early discussions the committee identified three central issues, based on the local data and their common readings, to guide its work. The specific issues are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Central Issues

1.	Recommitment to teaming as the central organizing feature of the middle schools
2.	Renewal of the exploratory function of the middle schools
3.	Restructuring the school day to include reallocation of time among content areas

Why Did We Do It?

Early efforts to reform middle schools focused on changing the organization and structure. Lots of time and energy was devoted to changing the schedule, to reorganizing into interdisciplinary teams, and to modifying curricular units (Clark & Clark, 1994). Despite these valiant efforts, in too many cases little changed. Teachers continued to teach the same way, principals to lead the same way. Classrooms and school operated the way they had always done.

In too many cases the efforts to change the school were launched because of demographic shifts or budget constraints, response to a national report on middle schools, or advocacy from a middle school "expert." This often left those responsible for implementing the changes angry and perplexed. Changes were

made without involvement from teachers and parents. The emphasis on structural changes left many stakeholders puzzled as to the rationale or the expected results.

Much has been learned about school reform since the beginning of the middle school movement in the sixties. Educators grew to appreciate the complexity of change and the importance of local context (Fullan, 1993; Schlechty, 1997). They came to understand that no two schools or districts are exactly alike (Deal & Peterson, 1998). They came to value the importance of developing and designing educational programs in a thoughtful, deliberate and intentional way (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). They acknowledged the need to base decisions on data and information (Schmoker, 1999) and they recognized the power of collaboration with parents, teachers and others to build shared commitment to an educational program (Lambert, et al., 1995; Sergiovanni, 1995).

These were powerful learnings and important considerations in designing the middle school review described in this paper. A central feature was embracing the concept of backwards design (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

The committee did not overtly discuss backwards design. However, its underlying principles guided the committee's work. Early committee tasks included articulation of beliefs about middle level students and middle schools. The beliefs were endorsed prior to consideration of program characteristics. Significant committee discussion centered on identification of the results desired from the middle school program and ways the results would be measured. These conversations then drove discussion about program design.

Similarly the committee grew to appreciate the importance of developing professional community among its members. Early committee work was characterized by occasional self-serving advocacy, by members identifying themselves as an expert in a particular content area, and by creation of alliances between subject areas (e.g., academic vs. exploratory).

A study of collaborative groups in schools identified several attributes of professional community. They included articulation of shared norms and values, a collective focus on student learning, and collaboration and reflective dialogue (Garmston & Wellman, 1999). As the committee evolved it exhibited each of these characteristics.

The committee experienced an important metamorphosis when it focused on the creation of a professional community, one centered on improving the educational experience for middle school students. As a result of the strategies described earlier (e.g., gather local data, common readings, agreed upon norms) the focus of the committee shifted from addressing individual (personal or specific content) needs to a collective focus on student learning.

The shift dramatically impacted the committee's work. As individual interests were set aside, members began to consider a range of program options. For example, during discussions on the use of time the conversation changed from the needs of curricular areas to how the needs of students could be served through creative and flexible use of time.

One specific issue seemed to dominate the committee's work---the use of time. Describing the issue this way altered the conversation. It wasn't about the schedule but about time as a resource, a tool to improve the educational experience for students. This focus contributed to the committee's ability to consider a range of options for use of time and to ultimately recommend an approach that maximized flexibility for students and teachers, one quite different from the present schedule.

The project had an immediate goal, resolve concerns about the middle school program. But other goals were also apparent. The approach to the committee's work, to its deliberate and intentional activity, was designed to model the collaborative practices that build professional community and that engage parents, teachers and school leaders in shared commitment to improving the educational experiences of children. It intentionally modeled practices that could be used in other school or district studies.

What Did We Learn?

This review of the middle school program engaged the community's stakeholders in an examination of core beliefs about middle school students, and middle school programs. It required a commitment of time and energy over two years, a belief in the value of collaboration as a tool to promote dialogue and build trust, and a perseverance that would allow the work of the committee to evolve naturally once personal interests were set aside and connections among members created.

The work of this committee resulted in several significant learnings about the power of such collaborative efforts to a shared commitment for improved educational experiences for students. The most important things learned included:

The Significance of Membership Decisions - Close attention to detail from the onset paid dividends in the long run. The selection process included an application asking potential members to acknowledge their willingness to commit to the subscribed time frame and meeting dates, to immerse themselves in the extra readings and subgroup work, and to comfortably share information with faculty in their individual buildings. With this in mind, time spent during initial and subsequent meetings to reinforce a commitment to these objectives proved helpful. Opportunities for participants to practice sharing information with one another and to accept a role within the larger committee became commonplace. The group came to appreciate that a long-term goal of work such as this is to mobilize a cadre of teachers and administrators to become articulate advocates for the committee's recommendations. This included understanding the relationship between member's personal commitment to the work of the group and the connection of that work to the creation high quality recommendations.

Once applications were received, membership was determined by the curriculum office with the goal of balancing representation by subject area.

Several other factors shaped selection of members. Key stakeholders in the selection process include building and district administrators. It was critically important to bring these stakeholders together when making selections so varying perspectives could be shared. It was also recognized that the inclusion of a building representative who holds a leadership role in school governance would build credibility.

While it was impossible to fully understand how group dynamics would manifest itself, insight into personal styles and "levels of respect" among staff added to the richness of the discussion and the ability to ultimately reach agreement on the recommendations. The district learned that it was important to have members who were articulate spokespeople for their point-of-view. It was also important to have participants willing to engage in meaningful dialogue in small and large group settings, to follow through with individual assignments and subgroup work, and to share a commitment to thoughtful collaboration with other group members. Efforts to recruit parent and community members with the same attributes also proved helpful.

During this project two critical incidents contributed to our understanding of the power of membership. The first incident occurred when the group began to talk more specifically about structure of the school day. Discussions of time and structure of the day immediately raised concern about teacher workload. As a result of these initial conversations it was suggested that someone representing the teachers' union might be an important addition to the committee. After much discussion, the group decided to add a union representative, familiar with contract issues, to the committee. While the addition of the union spokesperson informed certain contractual aspects of the work, other problems emerged. Having missed the initial meetings, the representative had minimal knowledge of the time already spent studying middle level education, developing belief statements and identifying issues from the local context. As a result, the dynamics of the group changed with this addition as conversations began to shift, at times, from what is best for students to how our decisions will impact the

teachers contract. Furthermore, the representative was not present when the group decided on a consensus model for making decisions. In hindsight, the group may have landed on a different decision making model had he been present at the beginning. Consequently, as the committee moved closer to making tough decisions regarding recommendations, there was considerable concern that the union representative would block or prolong our decisions.

Another defining membership issue occurred when one of member of the committee left the district at the end of the first year of the study. The committee chose not to replace the member. This meant that foreign language was no longer represented on the task force. Only later, when the discussion turned to the appropriate structure of the middle school foreign language program, would we understand the implications of this decision. Despite warnings from the facilitator about the inappropriateness of sharing the details of discussions and issued not yet resolved, misinformation about potential program cuts were shared with foreign language teachers. As a result, the issue had to be addressed with department members at both the middle and high school. This breach of confidentiality threatened the credibility of the task force work and created a batch of meetings for administrators trying to remedy the situation.

Maintaining a Record of the Work - Capturing the richness of committee conversations and dialogue during meetings emerged as an important issue. Minutes of committee work proved critical on a number of levels. Clear and specific notes tracking the progress of the work accurately informed outside stakeholders and helped framed the committee's work from one meeting to the next. The task force learned, early on, the importance of accurate notes when members found that the minutes may not have accurately conveyed the depth of their discussion or the nuances in the conversation. Equally important was the commitment to monitoring tasks that were agreed to during committee deliberations so that they were completed in a timely fashion. Occasionally, the committee discovered that information it requested or documents that it wanted to review were not provided. For example, at one point the committee agreed

that its agreed upon statement of beliefs be posted on the wall at each meeting. This never occurred because no one was ever explicitly given the task. Ultimately, the facilitator attached the belief statement to each meeting agenda.

In addition to guiding the work of the task force, minutes and notes that captured the context of the conversations informed the district's notion of current reform efforts. Complementary efforts that seek written and verbal feedback from task force members also contributed significantly to this knowledge base.

One important norm of the group was to take time at the end of each meeting, for individuals to reflect upon, and share their thoughts and perspectives. Some members engaged readily in the task. Others were more reluctant. The group learned the value of providing alternative opportunities for response as a tool to assist members in process. Simply stated, certain members never felt comfortable sharing their thoughts verbally, in the large group. Carefully crafted written questions provided another avenue for reflection, one that can be used by the facilitator to monitor the committee's work and offer guidance for structuring meetings.

Going Slow to Go Fast – In the age of heightened accountability and increased expectations for results, educational institutions must constantly balance efficiency and effectiveness when reforming school programs. All too often, the demands from varying stakeholder groups force school personnel to adopt quick solutions to complex problems. On the other hand, most participants in committee work such as described in this paper, were not schooled in the foundations of effective group practice. This resulted in some committee members pushing for quick resolution to the issues, rather than engaging in a more deliberate discussion and analysis. This stance paid little attention to the importance of background knowledge as a way to inform committee work and frequently negated the need to develop and commit to shared beliefs. This led the committee to question the degree to which individuals can appropriately commit to a more deliberative process when they are primarily focused a product.

Early in the committee's work, it became evident that this was going to be a teaching process. The group of thirty five teachers, administrators, community members and parents were embarking on a journey to learn more about middle level education and the issues driving debate about their own middle schools. Additionally, they would be participating in a thoughtful group process, a powerful tool in itself. In the case of this group, the absence of specific middle level background for many staff members and the inclusion of parents and community member among the group's membership required that the committee spend a good deal of time educating task force members about middle level education. Such efforts, aimed to bring the committee to some common level of knowledge and understanding, required patience and appreciation for the process by some members.

To teach a collaborative process requires a commitment to live it. As described earlier, taking time to develop shared beliefs and engaging in discussions about how the committee would conduct its work was an integral part of the process. These aspects of the work flourished when key members of the group modeled a commitment to the process. This was especially true when contentious issues arose but was equally important during the early stages of task force's work. The committee's work was complicated and the task difficult. The group was examining a middle school program that had evolved quite differently across the three site. While the central office staff recognized the differences, members from the individual middle schools, through no fault of their own, had a limited, and at times skewed, perception of what happening in the other buildings. Therefore, considerable time and energy was required to assure that task force members understood the differences between the schools.

It became clear at the conclusion of the task force's work that the final recommendations had their foundations in the early stages of our work. Helping committee members recognize the importance of the foundational aspects of the work was indeed difficult and even more difficult to communicate. It was only at the end of the work that many members came to appreciate the importance of

the early exploratory discussions about each topic that informed the work and contributed to a shared understanding of each issue. On the day of the final task force meeting several members noted the importance of attention to process strategies and agreement on collaborative norms early in the deliberations. One member said, "those early conversations were what made it possible to agree today."

Leadership and Initiative – The program review undertaken by this district benefited greatly from the presence of a neutral facilitator to guide the process. But the facilitator alone would not have gotten the job done. This district, like many, previously accepted the notion that consultants visit the district and do the work for us. In the case of this task force, the question that arose repeatedly was "Is Ron going to get us there?" Looking back, the real question should have been "Are we going to get ourselves there?"

Ultimately, it's the leadership of key individuals and the collective actions of the group that leads to quality work. Given the dynamics of this district at the time the review was begun, the need for a neutral facilitator was imperative. A lack of trust between teachers and administrators, perhaps fostered by recent initiatives and the long-term turnover in leadership, was present. It's an interesting and delicate balance with new curricular and instructional initiatives. In the case of this task force, no one really wanted to "own" the process. Teachers were initially unclear about the rationale for a program review and the three new principals, wanting to avoid the perception of a top down driven process, chose not to intervene.

Much of the task force's early work occurred as a large group. The initial work creating a common base of information through shared reading and discussion, the development of a set of shared beliefs, and the analysis of local data to identify the critical issues involved all members.

Once the issues were identified and initial research concluded, the task force divided into two work groups. This division accelerated the work. One dealt with structure of the school day, including the allocation of time among content areas,

the other focused on teaming. These work groups quickly came to understand the connections between the topics but continued to work on their tasks separately. It was during these work groups that the growth and transformation of individuals emerged it a highly visible way.

The dynamics of the small group work allowed members to gain more in-depth knowledge of the complexity of the issues. These smaller groups ultimately served as mini sessions of the larger group, taking on personalities of their own.

The experience of the scheduling subcommittee characterizes this growth. As group members learned how intertwined the scheduling issues were, they began to modify their stances and wrestle with the larger more complex issues. The interconnections forced members to abandon the narrow self-interests of individual content areas in favor of designing a model that maximized the benefits for students. As a variety of scheduling models emerged, people began to appreciate the importance of making adjustments based on prior discussion and input. One meeting informed the next as issues and concerns around one model were taken into account and presented in an alternative format. This allowed the administrators, who were presenting new models, to gain the respect of the teachers. This served as a turning point in our work.

The subcommittee work also funneled the conversations that began with the large group to a more intimate setting, allowing people to speak more openly without fear of reprisal from other task force members. Both administrators and teachers began to let their guard down in order to move the process along. Participants openly expressed their discomfort with certain aspects of the schedule only to be pushed by other members for clarification and justification. Teachers questioned teachers and administrators questioned administrators. This breakthrough contributed to more substantial dialogue and the sessions while intense, were cordial.

Trust, once again, began to emerge as the cohesive factor bringing teachers and administrators together. Knowing that the final product endorsed by this

group would ultimately need to be justified to the larger task force intensified the effort to create a quality recommendation. As our timeline for completion grew nearer persistence and forward thinking overcame frustration and regression. In a defining moment during one subgroup meeting, group members (including the union representative) were so engaged in finding a solution that they skipped lunch and stayed beyond the end of the school day.

The result of the work of this subgroup was twofold. Members of the teaching staff overcame their initial hesitation to commit to the recommendations. Becoming knowledgeable about the complexities of the schedule allowed them to articulate how the work group's recommendation emerged. Staff members took comfort in knowing that the group made the recommendations, and that no individual teacher would be held solely responsible for the language in the recommendation. It was also evident to group members that the work group had arrived at these recommendations after extensive deliberation and considerable thought. The recommendation was not a "rushed job."

With the conclusion of the work group's task, the final plan was shared with the larger group as a collaboration of ideas developed by both teachers and administrators. The fact that it wasn't a top down initiative allowed the precise details to be shared with confidence instead of hesitation, knowing that other work group members would add to the conversation as needed.

Toward the end of this process, some interesting notions were affirmed. Many members noted that they had participated in faculty meetings and/or other committee meetings that were dominated by negative voices. Often times, these very same people sat at those meetings wishing they had the courage to turn the discussion another way. That courage, during the task force's work, was fostered through shared participation, through common understanding, and through an ultimate belief that most people value positive leadership. It became apparent that the quiet ones were waiting for someone to capture their thoughts and to give them permission to raise their voices.

Conclusion

The district's review of its middle school program continues. The process successfully navigated early concern about process, persevered through concern about district commitment and budget priorities, and approaches its conclusion.

In many respects the committee's work and the foundation they built for reshaping the middle school program was just the beginning. The more difficult task lies in the implementation of the recommendations.

How does a district faced with serious budget constraints but committed to improving the educational experience of students assure that the work of this group is embraced and used to improve the middle school program? That ultimately is the test of any collaborative venture. Does it make a difference or does the work become just another report, among many, on bookshelves?

This group developed a shared commitment to improving the educational experience of middle school students. Their excitement and energy for the project must be captured and used to strengthen and refine their middle schools. By embracing and honoring their work and respecting the voices of teachers, students and parents, they will help restore confidence in their middle schools.

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